The Morphology of Post-War Territory as a Research Object

Laboratory of Military Ecotones

English speech for a 15 minute presentation

Dear colleagues,

In this presentation, we propose treating post-war territory as a research object in its own right. Our question is whether we can understand these territories more deeply when wars differ in scale, duration, forms of violence and historical circumstances. The territories themselves also differ. They occupy different natural environments, belong to different cultures and have different systems of settlement and economic activity.

We begin with the proposition that this diversity allows comparative research. Such research needs an approach that can describe common relations among territorial elements while accounting for the particular circumstances of each case. We propose morphological research as one such approach.

Accounts of war consequences commonly record destroyed buildings, population losses, contamination and reconstruction costs. These records are necessary. Yet they do not always show the spatial organisation that has emerged. A settlement may survive while losing its earlier functions. Parcels may remain in the land register although nobody cultivates them. A pond may still exist while no longer supplying a farm with water. In each case, relations among territorial elements have changed.

Let us first clarify what we mean by post-war territory. The expression ‘after war’ does not always mean that a conflict has definitively ended. Intensive fighting may stop while population displacement, restrictions on access and territorial division continue. Boundaries, enclaves, broken connections and infrastructure created or transformed by war remain in the landscape. We are therefore concerned with territories whose organisation and functioning continue to reflect the consequences of military intervention.

This definition covers both territories affected by wars that ended long ago and spaces where conflict has entered another phase. Each study needs to specify the period and the continuing effects under examination. We do not assume that all post-war territories share the same condition.

The morphological approach directs attention to this spatial organisation. We examine which forms exist, where they occur, what functions they perform and how they connect. These forms include settlements, fields, parcels, roads, water bodies, engineering structures and material traces of the past. We can study them at several points in time to establish what has survived, what has changed and what has emerged.

Four questions guide our research. What does the object look like? What is it used for? Which other objects does it connect with? Who keeps it functioning? These questions provide a

common basis for comparison. They also extend the description of visible forms to the conditions that sustain their use.

The answers depend on local conditions. Stopping maintenance of an irrigation canal in a dry region and of a drainage network in a wet region produces different consequences. In both cases, however, we can examine changes in water infrastructure and its relations with land use and settlements.

Cultural and geographic differences therefore enter the study as conditions that explain a territory's particular configuration. Comparison requires clear questions and comparable descriptions. Historical maps and records help establish earlier configurations. Field observation and imagery document present forms. Evidence about ownership, access and maintenance helps explain how those forms function. On this basis, we identify five directions for research into post-war territories.

The first direction is settlement and depopulation.

We examine changes in the settlement network: disappearing or merging settlements, population movements, new settlements and the redistribution of central functions. By central functions, we mean administrative, economic and social services for the surrounding territory. A village may remain on the map while ceasing to serve neighbouring settlements.

Historical material on Crimea after war and deportations illustrates this distinction. The survival of a settlement could coincide with population replacement, renaming and a changed position in the settlement system. The number of surviving villages therefore cannot fully describe continuity in the rural network. We also need information about their inhabitants, functions and connections with surrounding land.

We can ask the same questions elsewhere. What happens to a settlement network when people leave or relocate? Which centres retain their importance? Where do new dependencies develop?

The second direction is territorial presence.

In a space affected by conflict, residence and the operation of institutions can acquire an additional function. A settlement becomes evidence of the presence of a particular community or system of governance. A school, healthcare facility, religious site or road supports everyday life while maintaining connections with a wider political or cultural centre.

Here, research concerns the spatial separation of settlements, access, travel routes and the location of services. In an enclave, for example, it matters where a person can obtain medical care, where children attend school and which territories a road crosses. These connections shape the actual organisation of space.

Kosovo provides an example for asking how residence, access, ownership and institutional connections relate. The specific forms of territorial presence need investigation for each settlement and period.

The third direction is the material memory of territory.

The past persists through cemeteries, inscriptions, religious buildings, architecture, place names and traces of earlier land use. After war, some traces disappear, some survive and others acquire new meanings. New monuments and names appear. The ability to recognise a territory's earlier organisation changes.

Morphological research examines which material traces exist, where they occur and whether people can access them. An old cemetery may remain physically intact while becoming separated from the community that maintained it. Renaming a settlement may make it harder to connect a present-day map with historical documents.

Memory thus becomes open to spatial investigation. We can compare maps from different years, photographs, names and the condition of particular objects to establish changes in the historical legibility of a territory.

The fourth direction is land use and landscape maintenance.

Regular labour sustains rural territory. People cultivate fields, clear canals, repair roads and maintain shelterbelts and agricultural structures. These activities provide the everyday basis of territorial functioning. Large-scale population departure or the cessation of economic activity can transform a territory even where individual objects escaped direct destruction.

An image may show an overgrown field. To explain it, we need to establish when cultivation stopped, whether access remains possible, who owns the parcel and whether the water infrastructure works. Similarly, the disappearance of a rural road may indicate a changed connection between a settlement and its agricultural land.

We should distinguish economic changes from ecological changes. Ending cultivation may allow vegetation to recover. Our task is to identify the spatial organisation that emerges and the functions the territory retains or acquires.

The fifth direction is soil and managed water systems.

War can alter soil through contamination, compaction, surface disturbance and changes in water conditions. Comparing geochemical measurements with landforms, land use and water connections helps establish the spatial distribution of these changes. Contamination and the loss of agricultural productivity require separate assessments.

Water systems are particularly revealing. In many regions, people have long organised settlements and farming around ponds, dams, canals, pumping stations and drainage networks. After war, structures may be destroyed or survive without their earlier maintenance and coordination.

Consider a pond that remains on the map. To understand its present significance, we need to ask whether the dam retains water, how runoff has changed, which land connects with the pond and who maintains it. The presence of water alone does not establish continuity in the former water-management system.

We can investigate these five directions separately. Together, they provide a fuller description of post-war space. Three strengths of the morphological approach connect them.

The first is the distinction between the survival of an object and the continuity of its function. A physically existing object may perform a new function or lose its former one. A village remains but ceases to serve the surrounding territory. A canal survives but supplies no water. A house stands but no longer belongs to an operating agricultural system. This distinction helps identify consequences of war that a list of destroyed objects would miss.

A territorial survey therefore needs to establish use, connections and conditions of functioning alongside physical presence.

The second strength is the identification of different geographies within the same territory.

A map of ownership shows one set of relations, the distribution of residents another, and actual land use a third. An administrative boundary may differ from a limit on access. Water may connect parcels governed by different authorities. Material traces of former residents may remain where those residents no longer live.

Morphological research allows us to compare these spatial relations. For example, a field may belong to an absent owner, be used by someone else and depend on a canal that nobody maintains. Its condition reflects several relationships at once. Their mismatch becomes a concrete subject for investigation.

The third strength connects microgeographic observation with wider territorial processes.

We can investigate the history of one settlement, field, pond or road. At this scale, we can establish changes that disappear in regional statistics. When did maintenance stop? How did access change? Who used the object earlier, and who uses it now? Which connections survived?

For comparison, we should ask these questions through a common framework. Studies of individual objects in different regions then become comparable. One case helps formulate an explanation, while others help test the conditions under which it holds. In this way, microgeographic work provides a basis for a theoretical understanding of post-war territories.

In closing, let us connect this programme with the theory of military ecotones.

In this developing theory, a military ecotone is a system combining natural and human components that emerges or changes under a military regime. Its description includes altered functions, relations and boundaries. Contamination constitutes one aspect of this object. Population displacement, interrupted maintenance and changes in territorial use also matter.

Post-war conditions can preserve these changes long after intensive fighting ends. Research on post-war territories is therefore one task of the theory of military ecotones. The morphological approach makes it possible to describe specific configurations and compare them across cultural and geographic settings.

The proposed programme remains open to testing and revision. Its purpose is to define the research object more clearly. We have identified five directions and common questions that allow us to proceed to observation, mapping and comparative studies.

We can understand post-war territory through its forms, functions and spatial connections. Investigating them allows us to establish which territorial organisation persists after war, how it functions and how it differs from the earlier configuration. This defines the work of the Laboratory of Military Ecotones in this field.

Thank you for your attention.

Conceptual sources: After War: Territory, Rural Settlement, Memory, Soil and Water, working text supplied for this presentation; Nikolaenko D. The Paradigm of the Military Ecotone (2026), https://doi.org/10.66659/nhzds093; Nikolaenko D. Protocol for the Development of the Theory of Military Ecotones. Version 1.2 (2026), https://doi.org/10.66659/nm7g2h26. This source note is not part of the oral presentation.